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Not demeaning the dignity of women: A study on the authentic purpose of "paca" (bride-price) in a traditional Indonesian society

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Nearly all previous studies on customary marriage in traditional societies indicate that the practice of bride price demeans women. It, therefore, should be abolished. This study shows the opposite. The bride price practiced by traditional societies has a sacred purpose. The practice upholds women's dignity. To some extent, women are even worshipped as if they were fertility goddesses. In this study, "paca" (bride price) of the Manggaraians in Indonesia is taken as a study case. The study used qualitative and quantitative methods. The study found that nearly all informants reject the notion of "paca" as a practice of commercializing women. What is true is the opposite. Based on this study, the Manggaraian "paca" is a sacrificial expense of ritual celebration in which the bride's membership in her clan of origin is revoked. She will get it a new in the groom's clan. Naturally, the cost of this ceremony is borne by the groom's family. This is the core purpose of "paca" ritual of the Manggaraians, while other functions are extrinsic and are inappropriate practices that should be abandoned. The Manggaraian "paca", then, should continue to be cherished for its life-giving purpose while one should remain critical of its inappropriate practices.

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Introduction

Customary marriage rituals, which are carried out according to traditional laws in many societies across Asia, Africa, and Melanesia, remain widely practiced to this day. Research on this subject is extensive, with numerous publications spanning both historical and contemporary studies. Early works, such as those by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1967), Meyer Fortes (1972), Jack Goody (1973), John L. Comaroff (1980), James Fox (1980), Jane F. Collier (1988), and Julia Meryl Ekong (1992), have laid

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the foundation for further exploration. More recent research, both by international scholars and Indonesian academics, continues to contribute to the field (Akurugu et al. 2022; Oduro et al. 2022; Eves 2019; Hudson and Matfess 2017; Lon & Widyawati 2018; Onyango, 2016; Corno & Voena, 2016; Ashraf et al. 2015; Rudwick & Posel 2014; Ngutor Sambe 2013; Horne et al. 2013; Woog 2009; Sangadji 1982; Kleden 2007; Hagul 2011; Lon 2009; Ninggrum 2016; Nuwa 2019; Bamung 2020; Dentis 2020; Suriadi & Bin Ismail 2021).

Among the various aspects of customary marriage, one practice that has attracted significant criticism is the concept of bride price or bride wealth. This includes goods, animals, property, or money exchanged during the marriage ceremony, which critics argue is degrading to the dignity of women (Chireshe & Chireshe 2010, pp. 217–218). It is often viewed as a form of trading women, enriching the bride's parents and brothers, the wife-givers (Hague et al. 2011, p. 556). In some interpretations, it can be seen as a mechanism by which the groom's family purchases the bride's labor and reproductive capacity to bear children for his lineage (Chitando 2021; Muthegheki 2012, pp. 5-13; Horne et al. 2013, p. 506; Ngutor et al. 2013, p. 67). Conversely, the bride's family is seen as selling their daughter's labor power and reproductive capacity to a foreign clan, that of the groom.

The notion that this practice equates to the buying and selling of women is evident in the terminology used in the social sciences. The terms "bride price," "bride wealth," and "dowry" are often used interchangeably to describe the goods, animals, or money exchanged at customary marriage ceremonies in many traditional societies. These terms clearly reflect the notion that the bride is being bought from her family (the wife-givers) by the groom's family (the wife-receivers) in a form of economic exchange. Scholars such as Fortes (1972), Comaroff (1980), Yangisako (1987), Kirshner (2015), and Togarasei et al. (2021) have employed these terms in their research.

Given this perception, it is understandable that many critics view the practice as deeply insulting and degrading to women. Numerous negative consequences are often associated with this practice, including the humiliation of women, domestic violence, and the reinforcement of gender inequality (Lon & Widyawati 2018, pp. 275-277). Women are viewed as inferior, reduced to commercialized objects, and may be subjected to abuse by their husbands, who consider them property purchased at a high price (Chireshe & Chireshe 2010, p. 215; Hague et al. 2011, p. 557).

In some regions, such as Southern Africa, gender activists have vocally opposed the practice, advocating for its abolition (Togarasei & Chitando 2021, p. 4; Matambirofa 2021, pp. 31-32). While these critiques of "bride price" and "bride wealth" are valid in terms of identifying problematic practices in certain cultural contexts, scholars like Taringa and Museka (2021, pp. 17-22) argue that these terms are inaccurate and misleading. They assert that the terms "bride price" and "bride wealth," coined by early anthropologists, fail to capture the true essence and cultural significance of these practices in traditional societies, including among the Manggaraians of eastern Indonesia.

In Manggarai society, the terms "paca," "wagal," or "nempung" are used to describe what is commonly known as bride price or bride wealth in the literature. Based on discussions with selected informants

and responses from questionnaires, the Manggaraians reject the negative interpretations of "paca" as merely a practice of trading women. The majority of Manggaraians in this study assert that "paca" is not a means of purchasing a woman or exploiting her labor for the groom and his clan. Instead, they view it as a valued part of their marriage customs that does not degrade women's dignity. In fact, 91% of the respondents, both male and female, expressed strong support for preserving their cultural heritage of "paca," and 96% of women reported that they had not experienced domestic violence—either verbal or physical—related to the practice. For the Manggaraians, "paca" holds far deeper meanings than the criticisms of it as a form of commercialized marriage.

This study, therefore, seeks to address two key questions: first, what are the noble, life- giving values underlying the "paca" tradition of the Manggaraians? And second, what mechanisms can be proposed to protect the authentic, noble essence of "paca" in the Manggaraians' customary marriage practices—and in other traditional societies—from being corrupted by the influence of modern culture and the commercialization inherent in the capitalist economy?

Literature review

Theories of the functions of bride price

Many scholars have attempted to define and theorize the concept of bride price and bride wealth, as well as their various functions. The New Encyclopedia Britannica (2010, p. 510) defines bride price (or bride wealth) as the payment made by the groom or his kin to the bride's family to formalize a marriage. The Encyclopedia further states that this practice is common worldwide, though as an instrument for legitimizing marriage, bride wealth is most highly developed in Africa. In many African societies, the husband may not fully assume rights over his wife's sexual and reproductive rights, economic rights, and procreative capacities until a standard portion of the bride wealth is transferred. Payment may consist of goods or, less frequently, services and can be made in a lump sum or over an extended period. These payments may include livestock, cloth, food, money, or even an exchange of women.

Taringa and Museka (2021, pp. 17-19) identified four main functions of bride price, particularly as practiced by traditional Sub-Saharan African societies. Drawing from a range of scholars who have studied the subject, they outline the following functions: 1) bride price serves as a vehicle to commercialize women (commercialization theory), 2) it compensates the bride's labor and reproductive capacity (compensation theory), 3) it acts as an instrument to legalize and legitimize the marital union (legalization theory), and 4) it functions as a tool for social control (social control theory).

Commercialization theory

According to Taringa and Museka, many scholars view the bride price practiced by traditional societies in customary marriage as nothing more than a cultural transaction in which women are "bought" and "sold" to enrich their parents and male relatives. In this view, women are traded for cattle, money, clothes, food, and drink on their wedding day, with their parents raising them for future economic benefit. This perspective, which emphasizes the economic and transactional elements of

bride price in customary marriages, is upheld by many scholars, especially feminists and anthropologists (Taringa & Museka, 2021, p. 17).

For example, Posel, Rudwick, and Casale argue that the growing "commercialization" of bride price is a significant factor contributing to the decreasing marriage rate in South Africa (Posel et al., 2011, pp. 102-103). They state, “The payment of ilobolo or bride wealth by the prospective groom to the bride’s family, and in particular what is seen to be a growing ‘commercialisation’ of this payment, may act as a considerable constraint to marriage among African couples.” In line with Posel et al., Chiweshe asserts that bride price is a commodification of a woman’s body (2016, p. 1): “Through lobola [bride price], women’s bodies are commoditized and become the site of complex interactions of patriarchy, power, and politics. It is the body, and specifically the reproductive organs, which is the physical space for sexual activity and reproduction, which is intrinsically transferred from the bride’s father to the groom." Due to the perception of bride price as an instrument to purchase a woman's reproductive capacity, some scholars argue that the ilobolo in Zulu society should be considered a "child-price" rather than a bride-price. This was especially evident in historical Zulu society, where if a wife was barren, the husband could request a child from his wife's sister without paying a new bride price. Alternatively, the bride price paid for the barren wife could be refunded to the husband's family (Rudwick & Posel, 2014, p. 120).

Compensation theory

Many scholars also argue that the practice of bride price serves a compensatory function. In this view, the goods, cattle, and money exchanged during the marriage are meant to compensate the bride's family for the loss of their daughter. This loss includes her labor and her reproductive capacity to bear children for the groom's family, as emphasized by Nicola Ansell (2001, p. 702): "Lobola has been understood as payment for children for a lineage, as it brings about the absolute transfer of rights in a woman’s procreative capacity from the woman’s family to her husband’s family. In Lesotho, it is said that ‘the child belongs to the cattle.’

Scholars also contend that the bride is regarded as a laborer for her parents and kin, raised for this purpose. Additionally, her ability to bear children belongs to her family. When she marries into another clan, her family loses these assets, and the groom's family compensates for this loss with goods, cattle, and other valuables, commonly referred to as bride price or bride wealth. This is seen as the price of the bride or the wealth of her family that arises from the transfer of her labor and reproductive power (Chireshe & Chireshe, 2010, pp. 215, 219; Rudwick & Posel, 2014, pp. 120-121; Dafiq, 2018, p. 99; Nkomazana, 2021, p. 170; Fidelis Nkomazana, 2021).

Legalization theory

Many scholars contend that bride price functions to legalize and legitimize the marital union between the husband and wife. According to these scholars, the transfer of bride price is an essential part of customary marriage practices in traditional societies, making the marriage legally recognized. The union is considered valid only upon the payment of the bride price. The payment of bride price grants the groom full rights over the bride's labor and reproductive capacity, including her ability to bear

children for his family and clan (Ansell, 2001, p. 701; Chireshe & Chireshe, 2010, p. 215; Rudwick & Posel, 2014, p. 122).

Social control theory

Based on observations of traditional societies and their bride price customs, some scholars argue that bride price also functions as a means of social control. For instance, Nicola Ansell (2001, pp. 702-703) suggests that bride price gives older generations a degree of control over younger generations. In Zimbabwe, for example, bride price provided elders with control over their new daughter-in-law, their son, land, livestock, marriage, and behavior.

As mentioned earlier in this article, the functions of bride price described above do not align with the role of "paca" in the customary marriages of the Manggarai people in eastern Indonesia. The core function of paca is not to legalize marital unions, commercialize women, compensate for the bride's labor or reproductive capacity, or empower the older generation to control the younger generation. Instead, paca serves as a sacrificial cost that replaces the bride's membership in her original clan with a new membership in the groom's clan, maintaining the same five social, economic, and religious rights within the new group.

Research questions

This research studied the authentic purpose of "Paca" (Bride-Price) in a traditional indonesian society.

Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. ***What is the customary marriage of the Manggaraians?***
2. ***What are the stages of traditional Marriage?***
3. ***What is the "Paca" ritual and its authentic function?***

Research methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews and discussions with 20 carefully selected key informants from across the Manggarai region. To deeply explore the essence of "paca" in Manggaraians' customary marriages, the study specifically focused on elderly respondents, aged between 70 and 90 years. This age group was chosen because they possess firsthand knowledge of the original "paca" practices, which they experienced in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the changes that have occurred over time. These elders are believed to hold authentic insights into the tradition, as they have witnessed the evolution of "paca" into its current form, which has been significantly altered by extrinsic influences.

The selected elderly informants revealed that the original "paca" ritual was far less expensive than it is today. Traditionally, "paca" consisted of five animals: one buffalo and four horses, and no money was exchanged during the ritual. This is because, in earlier times, currency circulation was limited. The practice of five animals was symbolic, representing five fundamental socio-economic and religious

rights, according to the Manggaraians' traditional religious-agrarian philosophy. These rights are: 1) the village yard as a social playground (natas bate labar), 2) the traditional religious altar of the village (compang), 3) the residential house in the village (mbaru bate ka'eng), 4) the community spring (wae bate teku), and 5) the communal customary land (uma bate duat). These five elements represent the essential components that support a person's ability to lead a decent, healthy, and prosperous life in a traditional communal agrarian society.

During the "paca" ritual, the bride's membership in her parents' clan, which is marked by these five socio-economic and religious rights, is ceremoniously revoked. She then acquires a new membership, also accompanied by the same rights, within her husband's clan. This revocation and transfer of membership is witnessed by both the living community and the ancestors, as well as by the Supreme Being—God. On the day of the "paca" ritual, prayers are offered for the bride and her husband, invoking blessings for their health, fertility, and prosperity in their new life together.

As part of the sacred "paca" ritual, it is customary to sacrifice an animal, typically a buffalo, as an offering to the ancestors and God. This sacrificial buffalo, known as "kaba paca," is provided by the groom and his family. The meat from the sacrifice is shared among all participants in the ritual. It is important to note that the buffalo is not meant to enrich the bride's parents but is offered as a tribute for the couple's future blessings.

The four horses, however, are not given immediately on the day of the "paca" ritual. They are brought to the bride's parents, or her brothers (in the case of her parents' passing), at a later time, once the bride and her husband are believed to be healthy, prosperous, and have had children, which are seen as the fulfillment of the prayers offered by the bride's parents on the day of the "paca." These horses serve as a thanksgiving for the answered prayers. The original practice of "paca," as reported by the key informants, was not as expensive as it is today, with its modern- day version often involving multiple buffalo, numerous horses, and large sums of money (around Rp 300 million, or approximately USD 20,000), which is a stark contrast to the original, simpler ritual.

Quantitative data were collected through a survey involving 1,050 respondents, comprising 525 males and 525 females. Of these, approximately 900 respondents are Manggaraians living in rural villages, while the remaining 150 respondents reside in urban areas. It is assumed that the urban respondents, with their higher levels of education and exposure to modern lifestyles, differ from their rural counterparts in their perspectives on "paca." The questionnaire included four open-ended questions, with respondents choosing whether they agree or disagree, or answering yes or no. The purpose of the quantitative data was to gain a broader understanding of contemporary views on the cultural heritage of "paca" as practiced among Manggaraians today. The questions posed were as follows:

1. Do you agree that the cultural heritage of "paca" in the customary marriage of the Manggaraians should be abolished?

2. Do you agree that the practice of "paca" in Manggaraians' customary marriages equates to the buying and selling of women?

3. Do you think that the cultural heritage of the "paca" practice is burdensome to your family life?

4. As a husband, have you ever cursed or physically hurt your wife, or as a wife, have you ever been scolded or beaten by your husband due to the practice of "paca" in your customary marriage?

Data analysis

In this study, 90 respondents—both male and female—residing in urban areas, were assumed to have higher education levels and to be influenced by modern lifestyles and thinking. Among them, 86.67% (78 respondents) disagreed with the notion that "paca" should be abolished, while 13.33% (12 respondents) supported its abolition. A total of 87.78% (79 respondents) disagreed with the idea that "paca" amounts to the commercialization of women, and 12.22% (11 respondents) agreed with this view. Regarding the impact of "paca" on family life, 63.33% (57 respondents) stated that it is not burdensome, while 36.67% (33 respondents) believed it is. Interestingly, 100% (90 respondents) confirmed that they had never experienced domestic violence as a result of the "paca" practice. See Table 2a and Table 2b for more details.

Table 1a: Summary of 1.050 female and male responses to questionnaires

NO	Answers	Total	Answers	Total	Grand Total
Quest.01	A	94 (8,95%)	B	956 (91,05%)	1050
Quest.02	A	87 (8,29%)	B	963 (91,71%)	1050
Quest.03	A	212 (20,19%)	B	838 (79,81%)	1050
Quest.04	A	37 (3,52%)	B	1013 (96,48%)	1050

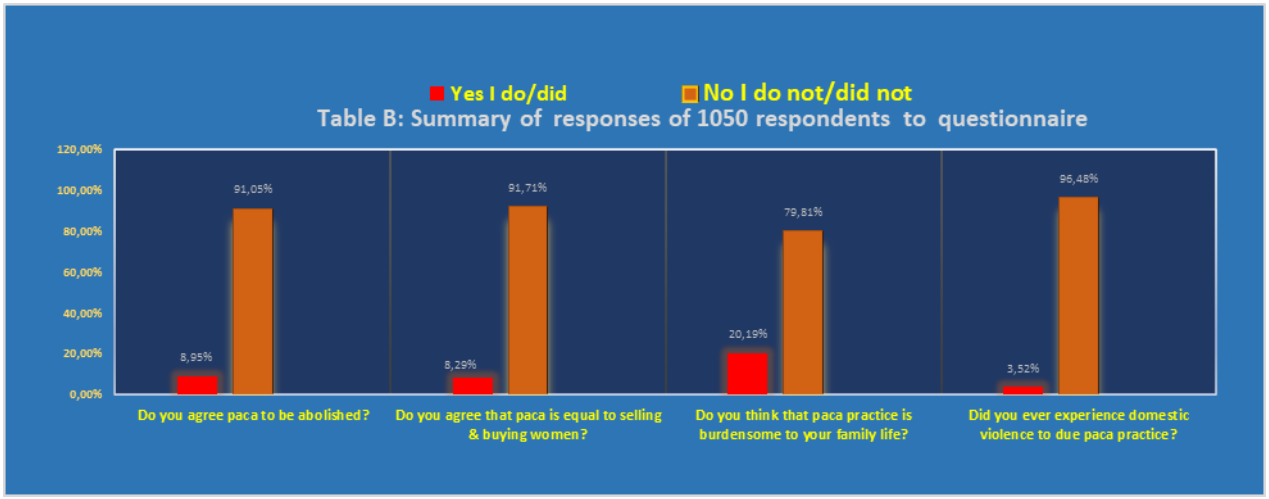

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Table 2a: Summary of 90 urban female & male responses to questionnaires					
NO	**Answers**	**Total**	**Answers**	**Total**	**Grand total**
QUEST.01	A	12 (13,33%)	B	78 (86,67%)	90
QUEST.02	A	11 (12,22%)	B	79 (87,78%)	90
QUEST.03	A	33 (36,67%)	B	57 (63,33%)	90
QUEST.04	A	0 (00%)	B	90 (100,00%)	90

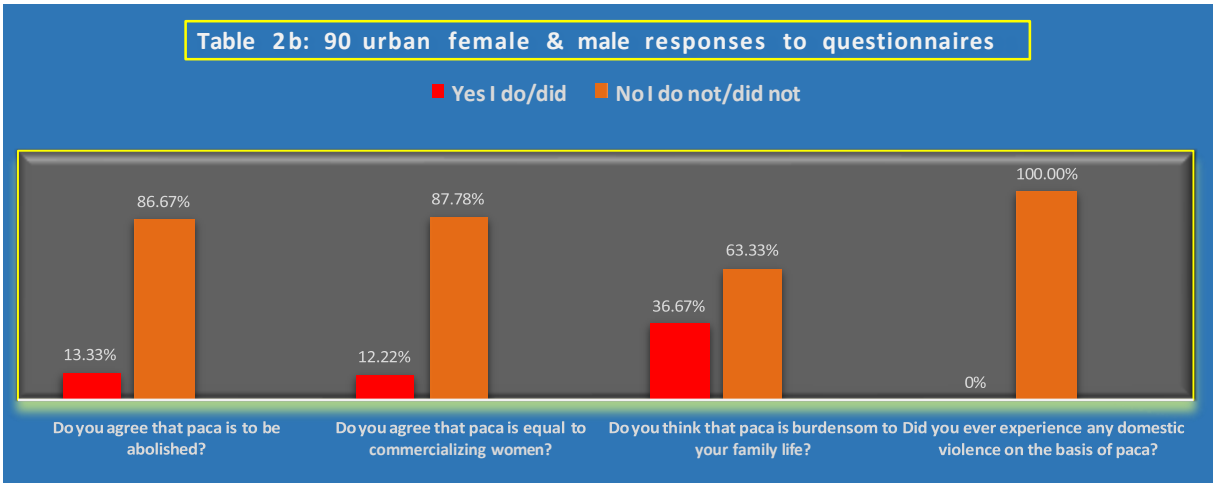
Table 2b: 90 urban female & male responses to questionnaires
Yes I do/did
No I do not/did not
13.33%
86.67%
12.22%
87.78%
36.67%
63.33%
0%
100.00%
Do you agree that paca is to be abolished?
Do you agree that paca is equal to commercializing women?
Do you think that paca is burdensom to your family life?
Did you ever experience any domestic violence on the basis of paca?

Results and discussion

Customary marriage of the Manggaraians

The Manggaraians have been an agrarian society since time immemorial. Their culture, including marriage customs, can only be fully understood within the context of their agrarian life philosophy. As an agrarian society, it is inconceivable to live in a village without possessing a portion of agricultural land owned communally. According to the 20 elderly informants interviewed for this study, two inseparable entities are central to a decent and prosperous life: 1) their customary house (mbaru gendang), the sacred mother-house of the villagers in each village, and 2) their customary land (uma duat), which sustains their livelihood.

In addition to these two entities, the traditional agrarian Manggaraians follow a philosophical life standard that consists of three other fundamental elements. These are: 1) a village yard (natas labar), a social space for personal growth within the collective community; 2) a water spring (wae teku), a vital source of water necessary for survival; and 3) a stone altar (compang), located at the center of the village, where villagers offer rituals to the Sky-God (Mori Kraeng) and various spirits, including ancestral ones. Together, these five entities form the pillars upon which a decent and prosperous life is

built.

Collectively, these five basic elements are considered a set of socio-economic and religious rights (hereafter referred to as "SER rights"), essential for a person according to the Manggaraians' agrarian life philosophy. These five SER rights are symbolized by five knives made from sharp bamboo blades called lampek lima (lampek meaning bamboo blades, and lima meaning five).

These five SER rights are conferred to every child at birth. In the past, when a baby was born, the assisting mothers would be asked whether the baby was a boy or a girl. If the child was a boy, he was called ata oné, meaning "an insider," because, in a patrilineal society, he would remain in his clan and bring a wife from a foreign clan. If the child was a girl, she was called ata pe'ang, meaning "an outsider," because upon marriage, she would leave her family's clan and join that of her husband's.

For Manggarai women, the concept of being an outsider only becomes real when they marry. If they remain unmarried, they are never considered perpetual outsiders, contrary to claims made by some previous studies (cf. Lon & Widyawati 2018, pp. 275-276). Both men and unmarried women, according to Manggaraians' life philosophy, are regarded as insiders and share the same equal five SER rights.

One of the first indications of this equality occurs at birth, when the baby's umbilical cord is cut slowly with each of the five sharp bamboo blades. This symbolic act signifies the granting of these five SER rights, which include the right to a house (mbaru kaeng), the right to the village yard (natas labar), the right to the water spring (waé téku), the right to the stone altar (compang), and the right to customary land (uma duat). These rights are equally conferred upon both boys and girls from the moment of their birth.

Following a period of seclusion with the mother lasting five to eight days, the baby's presence—whether a boy or a girl—is publicly proclaimed to the entire village community, including both the living and the deceased, as well as to God, in a sacred ritual. The baby is welcomed as a new member of the living community, and the community prays for their health and prosperity. Additionally, the baby is formally informed of their rights to the five SER rights: house, village yard, altar, water spring, and customary land.

If, later in life, a Manggarai woman marries and joins her husband's clan, her membership in her parents' clan, along with the five SER rights, must be revoked and left behind. This revocation, known as the "paca" ritual, marks the essence of the process of transferring a woman from her natal family to her husband's clan.

Stages of traditional marriage

Among the Manggaraians, the marriage process consists of two main stages: marriage engagement and the wedding.

Stage One: **Marriage engagement**

In this stage, after the prospective groom has seen and met the girl he has fallen in love with, he, along with an entourage of his family, will visit the house or village of the bride's parents for the first time. On behalf of the groom and his family, a spokesperson will formally announce his interest and serious intention to marry the girl. If the bride accepts this intention, with her parents' support and endorsement, both families will move forward with the next two important steps.

First, they will select a date for the wedding according to customary law. Second, they will decide whether the wedding will be immediately followed by the "paca" ritual. The decision usually rests with the groom's family, as they are responsible for providing an animal, typically a buffalo, to be sacrificed during the "paca" ritual, while the bride's family retains the right to conduct the ritual.

If the groom's family is not ready for the "paca" ritual immediately after the wedding, two possible arrangements can be negotiated. The groom cannot take his wife to his clan without revoking her membership from her parents' clan, along with her five SER rights. In the past, the couple would have lived within the bride's clan. They would be given land by her family and would raise their children there until they were able to provide for the "paca" ritual. Alternatively, the groom may be allowed to take the bride to his clan, with the "paca" ritual being postponed indefinitely until they are ready for it or until the bride's family requests its performance.

Stage Two: **The wedding**

Once an agreement is made regarding the "paca" ritual—whether it will occur immediately after the wedding or be postponed—the wedding ritual can proceed. According to the 20 elderly informants interviewed for this study, weddings in the past, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, were relatively simple. They were considered sacred but not overly solemn, and they did not involve large gatherings from the bride's and groom's families.

The core of the wedding ritual is the offering of a sacrificial animal, typically a pig called ela mbukut, by the bride's family through a spokesperson acting as a priest. This act, witnessed by ancestral spirits and a few members of the local community, is accompanied by prayers for the success of the newly formed family. The family prays for the couple's fidelity, asking that their marriage remain strong, like cedar wood, which cannot fade even when immersed in water for years. They also pray that their bond will not be easily broken, likening it to a fence made of tightly bound stones or a wooden fence tied firmly with ropes. Furthermore, they pray for the couple's love to last forever, until the end of their lives.

Once the prayer is complete, the sacrificial pig is slaughtered, and according to Manggarai customary law, the bride and groom are legally considered husband and wife. Both now have full conjugal rights to one another. That very night, the bride and groom are escorted by several adult women from the bride's family to the bridal room, where they will sleep together for the first time and carry out the sacred duty

of creating the next generation.

The "paca" ritual and its authentic function

Among the various aspects of Manggarai marriage customs, the "paca" ritual is the most solemn. Echoing John Chitakure's observations on Sub-Saharan African cultural practices (2020, pp. 29–32), the "paca" ritual in Manggarai is a rite of passage, marking a life transition. It should be conducted in the presence of both visible and invisible communities to which the bride belongs. Consequently, the "paca" ritual is attended by the living-dead community of ancestors, as well as numerous members of the bride's extended family—including maternal grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other relatives, as well as the groom's family. Due to the large number of people present, the ritual is often referred to as nempung, meaning a gathering of many people.

The reason for such a large attendance is that the "paca" ritual marks the bride's departure from her original clan and the revocation of her five SER rights. She permanently leaves her loving village (natas labar and mbaru kaeng), the stone altar (compang) of her traditional religion, the water spring (wae teku), and the customary land (uma duat). These five life-giving SER rights are transferred through the "paca" ritual, during which the bride is excardinated (or extracted) from her native kin. Her transition to her husband's clan is solemnly declared to the living community, the ancestral spirits, and the Sky-God by the sacrifice of a buffalo called kaba paca, which means sacrificial buffalo for the "paca" ritual. The buffalo is offered to God for blessings and to the ancestors for their prayers and guidance for the bride and groom. The blood of the sacrificial buffalo seals the bride's departure from her parents' clan.

Before the prayer is offered, the bride's family and her maternal kin, along with the groom's family, will give their blessings and prayers for the couple. These prayers are symbolized by the gift of specific clothing items: 1) lipa lecak, given by the wife-givers' family (usually maternal uncles and aunts in the absence of maternal grandparents), 2) lipa pateng, given by the bride's kin, and 3) lipa kumbu, given by the bride's parents. These prayers, symbolized by the clothes, are collected by a priest of the Manggarai traditional religion, representing the bride's parents, and incorporated into the main prayer of the "paca" ritual.

In the prayer, delivered in a majestic but mournful tone, it is declared to the bride, in the presence of her family, that due to her love for her husband, she is no longer part of her birth family but is now part of her husband's clan. She is likened to a plant uprooted from its nursery (her parents' clan), now destined to join her husband's kin.

In her husband's clan, the bride will be granted new membership, along with the same five SER rights. The prayer also wishes that the couple may enjoy health, prosperity, and the ability to raise children and grandchildren within the husband's clan, which she is now part of. This prayer is sealed with the blood of a sacrificial buffalo, which is offered to God for blessings and to the ancestors for continued intercession.

Once the "paca" ritual is completed, the bride is escorted by her kin to the groom's clan. Upon arrival, she is warmly welcomed with music and dance, and her family treats her like a goddess, symbolizing fertility and new life for the clan. In the past, the bride was carried by several men from the groom's family to avoid her touching the ground, and she would step on an egg, signifying her new rebirth within her husband's clan. This act is accompanied by a jar of water and a fire, all symbolizing the five SER rights she now holds within her new clan.

In this welcoming ritual, called roko, it is declared that the bride is now fully integrated into her husband's clan, with the same five SER rights. Contrary to previous studies (e.g., Lon & Widyawati, 2018), the bride is not an outsider. Along with her husband, she is now an insider, just as she was within her birth clan. From this point onward, Manggarai women, like their male counterparts, are culturally considered members of their husband's clan, never outsiders.

The roko ritual is concluded by the slaughter of a buffalo given to the bride's kin, who escorted her to her husband's clan. The buffalo symbolizes the bride's safe arrival and integration into her husband's family. It is not intended to enrich the bride's family but to celebrate her new status within her husband's clan.

"Paca" is not a commercialization of women

Upon examining the core content and authentic purpose of "paca," it becomes clear that this practice holds deep cultural, psychological, and religious significance. In the past, it was a relatively inexpensive ritual, yet its essence remains sacred, noble, and highly dignifying for women. The practice upholds their dignity rather than undermining it. When asked why the "paca" was inexpensive and why it should remain so today, the 20 elderly individuals interviewed for this study explained that the essence of "paca" is not to commodify women. Instead, it is a ritual involving the revocation of the woman's SER (Social, Economic, and Reproductive) rights. Furthermore, they emphasized that each village and clan requires women from other clans to become the mothers of their children. Just as one's clan village would not want to face difficulty in acquiring women from another clan, it should not cause undue hardship for others when they need women from one's clan. These interviewees expressed the principle: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

When asked about the number of animals required for the "paca" ritual, most interviewees clarified that, traditionally, only five animals were needed, provided by the groom and his kin. These animals symbolize the five SER rights. The first is a buffalo, which is sacrificed and offered to God and the ancestors during the event. This buffalo is known as the kaba "paca" among the Manggaraians, referring to a buffalo sacrificed specifically for the "paca" ritual. The remaining four animals are horses. The groom and his family may present only one horse at the time of the ritual as an advance gift. The 20 elderly informants stressed that in the past, money was not involved in the "paca" ritual because currency was not as easily circulated as it is today.

It would not be a significant issue if the groom and his family could not provide all four horses at once. According to Manggarai customary law, the essence of "paca" is not the commercialization of women.

These four horses, also referred to as jarang nggolong in certain parts of Manggarai, literally mean the horses that the groom and bride's new clan must earn through hard work.

These horses may be provided at a later time, often years after the ritual, when the groom and his bride have become economically prosperous, spiritually and physically healthy, and have borne children. They would then offer the horses as a thanksgiving to God and the ancestors, in recognition of the prayers offered by the bride and groom's families and their extended kin, which supported their prosperity at the time of the "paca" ritual.

Posel and Rudwick argue that the commercialization of women, as exemplified by the bride price in some Sub-Saharan African societies, is demonstrated by the increasing frequency of upfront payments rather than installments spread over a longer period (Posel et al., 2011, p. 109). However, this is not the case with the Manggarai "paca." It is explicitly forbidden for the groom and his kin to provide all the livestock, especially the four horses, at once. Even if they are capable of doing so on the day of the "paca" ritual, it would be taboo to do so. The reason is that these animals are not intended to settle any debt. Instead, they are meant to be provided years later, when the couple is prosperous and healthy, as a thanksgiving for the answered prayers of their families.

If the groom and his kin were to offer the horses prematurely, it would be interpreted as a thanksgiving sacrifice to God and the ancestors before the prayers had been answered.

Since the essence of the "paca" ritual is not to commercialize women, even after the bride has been fully incorporated into the groom's clan, it does not grant the groom and his kin the right to treat her however they wish, including with cruelty. Should this occur, the bride's parents and brothers would intervene to investigate the situation. If the groom or his family are found guilty of severe offenses or violence, they would face severe consequences imposed by the bride's parents and brothers. The groom and his kin cannot claim ownership of the bride and treat her however they wish simply because of the ritual.

It is also noteworthy that in some traditional societies in southern Africa, such as among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, if a married woman has an affair resulting in a child, the child is considered the legal offspring of the formal husband, not the biological father, based on the notion that the wife's reproductive capacity has been purchased by the formal husband (Matambirofa, 2021, pp. 53-54). This, however, is not the case in Manggarai customary marriage. According to Manggarai customary law, the "paca" ritual is not intended to buy the woman's reproductive rights. Therefore, any child born out of wedlock belongs to the mother and her partner, not to her formal husband.

"Paca" is not legalization of marriage

Many scholars argue that in southern African traditional societies, such as the Shona in Zimbabwe, the payment of bride wealth legalizes marriage. Marital unions in which bride wealth has not been paid—either in part or in full—are not recognized as legitimate marriages. It is a prerequisite for marriage. No marital union is recognized before the bride price is paid, and the payment grants the prospective husband conjugal rights (Matambirofa, 2021, pp. 53-54). However, this is not the case with the

Manggaraians.

According to Manggarai customary marriage law, the “paca” ritual is not a prerequisite for marriage. The goods and livestock provided by the groom and his kin during the “paca” ritual are not intended to legalize or legitimize the marriage. The marriage, consummated by the groom and bride immediately after the second stage of the Manggarai customary marriage, called mbukut or pongo (meaning to tie together), is already valid. During the mbukut ritual, the groom and bride are officially proclaimed husband and wife. The families then pray that their love lasts forever, be strong as a rock, not shaky like a fence of loose stones, that they prosper economically, and that they bear many children.

The “paca” ritual, which revokes the bride’s membership from her parents’ clan along with her five SER rights, can be postponed indefinitely. It may be delayed for years, even until the bride passes away from old age after having many children and grandchildren. The “paca” ritual can even be performed posthumously as a formality. Despite this, their children are not culturally recognized as full members of their father’s clan until the bride’s membership and her five SER rights are revoked through the “paca” ritual. However, this does not affect the bride and groom’s right to consummate their love as husband and wife or to bear children. The conjugal rights are not conferred by the “paca” ritual.

Conclusion

This article challenges the common misconception of “paca,” often mistakenly referred to as a bride price, by shedding light on its true essence within the Manggarai culture in eastern Indonesia. The core purpose of “paca” is not to sell or purchase a woman's labor or reproductive capacity, as is often assumed. Instead, it is a profound cultural ritual that signifies the revocation of the bride's membership from her parents' clan, along with her five key social, economic, and religious rights. Upon joining her husband's clan, she is granted a new membership and is endowed with the same rights.

During this transition, the bride and groom are enveloped in prayers from her entire family, asking for their prosperity, while an animal provided by the groom’s kin is sacrificed as a gesture to invoke God’s blessings. At its heart, “paca” is a life-affirming practice that honors and uplifts women, ensuring that they are not diminished in any way.

In contrast to previous studies, this research clearly establishes that the Manggarai “paca” ritual is not about commodifying women or reducing them to their reproductive or labor functions. Once the bride enters her husband's clan, she retains her autonomy—just as she did in her own clan—and is granted equal economic, social, and religious rights, on par with those of her husband.

The essence of the “paca” ritual is not about ownership; it is about mutual respect and the renewal of the bride’s identity within her new community. In this way, the ritual celebrates her as a fully integrated, equal member of her husband’s clan—free and autonomous in every sense.

Thus, while the “paca” ritual, often misunderstood as a bride price, deserves to be honored for its deep

cultural significance, it is crucial to approach its contemporary misapplications with a critical eye. While exploring these modern misuses is beyond the scope of this article, this gap in research provides an important direction for future studies.

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Notes:

***** In many cases, they would choose to stay for life in the clan of the bride and they would rarely be enslaved in any way even though, according to customary law of the Manggaraian patriarchal society, they are not part of the clan. In many villages of the Manggaraians, their descendants can be very prosperous and, in terms of their growth number, they can even outnumber the members of the clan of the bride's parents.

****** Very often the *"paca"* ritual is postponed for years and years. My own mother, for instance, got married in 1959 and the ritual *"paca"* for the official revocation of her five SER rights was made fifty years later, that is, in July 2010 when as a family we were ready for the ritual. We went back to the birth family of my mother bringing with us all the requirements requested by my mother's kin for her *"paca"* ritual. My oldest sister, an elementary school teacher, got married in July 1986 and she moved to her husband's clan immediately after the wedding by conducting a kind of simple and temporary ritual called *roi lo'ang* while the paca ritual for her was postponed until this year of 2022.

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